



On Watching Your

By Sarah Cornwell

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In the United States, we are living in a time of anger and fear. You may have felt some measure of this yourself. In general, these are not considered to be positive emotions, but in certain circumstances, they may be justifiable — a righteous anger against cruelty and injustice — or helpful — a fear that triggers an appropriate fight-or-flight reflex which could save a life. In this piece, I hope to walk a fine line by advocating for more peaceful language in the way we discuss matters of great importance and consequence online while retaining a sense of how deeply important the outcomes of these discussions are — be it Black Lives Matter, immigration, healthcare, climate change — to so many of our brothers and sisters, and, by extension, to all of us who have a share in this collective body.

I will not seek to make any value

judgments on any side of our current discourses. (Not that value judgments are not important; this is simply not the goal of this essay.)

Particularly in the devastating wake of COVID-19, much of our communication is written and online via emails, social media posts, and comments on various media websites. Without the benefit of body language, facial expression, and tone of voice providing context, written communication is easily misunderstood. Indeed, it is not always clear when a misunderstanding even occurs because we often overestimate how clear we are when we communicate.

A fun illustration of this is a well-known Stanford University study in which one person taps the rhythm of a song to a listener who is supposed to guess which song it is. Tappers estimated that listeners would guess with 50% accuracy. In fact, listeners guessed correctly only 2.5% of time. Where a tapper could “hear” in his head lyrics, orchestration, and the logic behind

whether the taps indicated, say, drums or a sustained note, the listener would be privy to none of that.

In a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, several researchers built on this concept and demonstrated that over email, both writers and readers were overconfident in their ability to communicate and identify sarcasm, each declaring they were as confident as they would be if they could communicate the sarcasm verbally. Even when the two people communicating knew each other, they were both overconfident in their ability to convey accurately and identify a sarcastic tone in written form.

Misunderstanding, however, is only a small part of the trouble that sarcasm can cause for effective online communication. It also can turn off third party readers, or “lurkers,” to the information being presented or disparaged by the

(those that don’t), causing greater division as well as potentially creating more good will toward the supposedly victimized out-group — the opposite effect that a debater generally wishes to have.

In addition to the risk of sarcasm leading to misunderstanding and to the perception of an oppressor/victim dynamic, sarcasm appears to add to the uncivil nature of our current discourse — what some have labeled “the nasty effect.” This can include anything from general haughtiness, to name-calling, to bold, exaggerated claims meant to inflame the opposition. Inflaming the opposition makes it less likely one will win others over to one’s own viewpoint (see here, for example), and more neutral lurkers who are not well-informed on the subject are more likely to view the uncivil writers as less credible, and they also are more likely to be turned off to the issue by the uncivil discourse (see here and here).

As such, written sarcasm can have a counter-productive, or harmful, effect on how well the writer and his argument are received by third parties: it further solidifies divisions and, taken as part of the broad characterization of uncivil discourse, it discourages more neutral readers from taking part in the conversation on the subject.

What, then, is the effect that sarcasm can have on the user? The word itself should make us cautious. Sarcasm comes from the Greek *sarkazein*, which means “to tear flesh, bite the lips in rage, to sneer.” Is this not strikingly similar to the biblical description of gnashing of teeth, something the enraged Sanhedrin do before they stone St. Stephen, or what the poor wretches do who have been cast into the outer darkness? Sarcasm can be written with good intentions, absent of rage and sneering, even if those intentions are ultimately misunderstood. In such cases, I would venture that while the written piece can still be harmed by the miscommunication sarcasm often stokes, the writer is safe. However, if sarcasm is used in anger — even righteous anger for a just cause — the writer risks not only harming his own argument, but harming himself as well.

Hell — the place of teeth-gnashing, of *sarkazein* — is not a place anyone would wish to be regardless if one sees it as real or metaphorical. St. Paul, in the epistle to the Galatians, in which he seeks to settle fractious debates between Jews and Gentiles, writes of the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23). He says we are not to provoke one another. And if someone transgresses, we “should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” There is no place for a tearing, biting, sneering, raging sarcasm, or any uncivil tone in this way of relating to our brothers and sisters, even those whose views are morally repugnant.

For some practical steps of how to start putting some of St. Paul’s guidance into practice, it could be worth revisiting Alan Jacob’s *How To Think*, which he wrote as response to the growing incivility he saw in public discourse back in 2016. It is a short, useful book which identifies habits and behavior to adopt in order to foster more charitable and effective communication. It would be particularly helpful for online communication, where many of us — myself included — can experience the “disinhibition effect,” which includes feelings of dissociative anonymity and dissociative imagination encouraged by a lack of authority. The changes in our online behavior could be so extreme that it is almost like we become different people, a Dr. Jekyll in the flesh and a Mr. Hyde online.

There is much to discuss in our world, and decisions that derive from many of these discussions are crucial to the wellbeing of God’s people. Participate, deliberate, strive, and do not lose heart, but do it all in a spirit of gentleness. As Christians we can help to set the tone, not one of a biting rage, but of kindness and self-control. Our words will be better received and therefore better considered, and our own wellbeing will not suffer, making us better able to continue the long journey towards what is good and just.

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Language

sarcastic writer.

In the journal *Discourse Processes*, a study was published in which third-party participants read either a sarcastic or a non-sarcastic aggressive argument between individuals of the same gender. Participants perceived the sarcastic argument as more aggressive and “victimizing” of the other side. A secondary analysis showed that if participants took the perspective of the so-called aggressor, the sarcastic comment was more likely to be viewed as humorous and less aggressive than those who took the perspective of the so-called “victim.”

In other words, from the perspective of silent readers following an aggressive online debate, writers using sarcasm frequently appeared to be victimizing the other side even if the sarcasm was meant to be humorous; the joke was lost on anyone that sympathized with the so called “victim” position. Sarcasm becomes a wedge that further separates the in-group (those who find the comment humorous) from the out-group